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THE HALFWAY HOUSE FOR THE ALCOHOLIC



by Earl Rubington

Members of Alcoholics Anonymous, students of alcohol problems, and public health workers have all combined to make the movement for alcoholic rehabilitation a success. Their leaders, programs, objectives, and techniques for helping alcoholics to recover have all worked where other institutions persisting in established ways have failed. The broad social movement for alcoholism rehabilitation is now a going concern, having met the first test of getting results.

Movements arise when the existing social organization produces mounting dissatisfaction because of its failure to solve the presenting problem. In interposing its own workable solution to the persistent difficulty, the movement becomes socially organized in its own right. The second test of a social movement can be phrased in the question, Will success spoil the movement? When the movement becomes a going concern, maintaining organizational routine sometimes becomes more important than the movement's original goals.¹ The movement is then in real danger of becoming a member of the Establishment, if not an Establishment in its own right. Friendly critics of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, decry its increasing tendencies toward formalization and reduction of sponsor-protégé relationships.²

The emergence, development, organization, and changes in the idea of a halfway house for the rehabilitation of homeless alcoholics can be understood best as a social movement. And at this very moment, the idea of a halfway house as a social movement seems rather insecurely poised halfway between meeting the first test of a movement, namely, getting results, and the second test, coping with its own organizational problems.

The present chapter analyzes this submovement at this critical juncture, halfway between obtaining results and solving the organizational problem.

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The Situation of the Homeless Alcoholic

In categorizing the alcoholic, one can focus on his acts, his attributes as an actor, his situation, and the consequences of his actions for himself and others. All of these are most relevant, though the weight to be attached to any one of them will no doubt vary from time to time. But most critical is the social definition of the alcoholic and the alcoholic's definition of himself in response to that social definition.

The homeless alcoholic, then, is a person who has no regular membership in a family unit of whatever kind, is socially isolated, is usually jobless, and suffers more injuries than he causes through excessive drinking. What complicates this definition is that the person to whom it is being affixed may not agree with any or all of its particulars. Similarly, people who come into frequent contact with the person may or may not agree. The fact of the matter is that both will use whatever parts of the definition are convenient for them at that time, in that place, and in that situation.

For example, it may be convenient for the person so defined to claim that he is homeless if he seeks shelter, or to ask for work if he sees himself as jobless. Similarly, it may also be convenient for him to claim that he is an alcoholic if his self-inflicted injuries are more than he can handle. But, also, it may be convenient for him to claim that he is socially isolated when he is in search of drinking company. Much will depend on his situation and with whom he is talking at the moment.

The alcoholic's situation is most crucial in the formulation of both social and self definitions; for, inevitably, no one ever meets him when he exhibits the pure essence of homeless alcoholism. Everybody—well-wishers, rehabilitators, neutrals, or evil-doers—always meets him in a particular situation. The inability to define his situation correctly and to produce an adequate response to it is the basis for the persistent institutional failure that ultimately gave rise to the halfway house movement. And the simple, obvious fact is that the situation in which anyone, particularly those who are official agents of social control, confronts a homeless alcoholic is always one of transition.

It might be well to see him as the "man between." When drunk, he is between a state of social awareness and unconsciousness. On the street, sober, he is frequently on his way from jail, hospital, mission, or clinic

to a job, a “flop,” a drinking group, or a solitary bottle. He may often claim that he is short only the price of a drink; supply his want, and he is off to the nearest bar or package store. There are, however, other shortages that cannot be met so easily. And it is these shortages that guarantee that, unless they are met, he will be back to ask for the price of a drink again, that he will continue to be in transition simply because no person, group, or agency can perform successfully in the role of go-between.

Most agents of social control, official or unofficial, punishment-oriented or treatment-oriented, meet the homeless alcoholic in transition. And, for the most part, it is usually at the point of release from an official establishment, such as a mission, a jail, a hospital. Invariably, the first words out of the man’s mouth are “I just got out of...” And the reason the man is destined to meet some agent of social control (and alcoholism counsellors as well as police officers are here included as such agents) is because of some inability to cope with his acute release problem.

Upon release from an official establishment that has just finished housing, punishing, or treating him, the homeless alcoholic almost achieves pure essence. For now he is acutely homeless, socially isolated, jobless, and still very much the alcoholic regardless of how sober he seems to be at the particular moment. Given the fact that he generally lacks social skills for making contact with legitimate persons who uphold conventionality and has few technical skills to make any exchanges with them worth their while, he is thrust back upon meeting his transitional state in typical fashion—hunt up cronies, go in on a bottle, and while away the day in seeming nonchalance. Cronies answer the problem of social isolation; the bottle solves the problem of how he will define himself at that moment. Shelter for the night, the traditional “flop,” even a job may all be obtained. But arrest and incarceration are soon to follow; and arrest for public intoxication activates the correctional cycle whose business is persistent institutional failure.³

The Social Background of Institutional Failure

A man who is homeless, socially isolated, usually jobless, and an alcoholic comes into frequent and increasing contact with agencies of social control. None, apparently, is able to assist the man in dealing with his transitional state so that he can permanently find a home, conventional associations, work, and sobriety. The simplest explanation, of course, is that the man

really doesn't seek these values; or that he seeks them, but in the wrong times, places, and circumstances; or that he seeks them, yet is really unable to manage them if he does realize them. No doubt all this is true.

But truth has an interactional character, for it takes at least two people to sustain a given definition of the situation. Agents and agencies of social control find their work with homeless alcoholics much easier if they define them at face value. And, since these faces are frequently dirty and unshaven and show the ravages of drink, it is easier to say "once a drunk, always a drunk." Here counsellor and client agree on a definition of the situation on which both of them can act, thereby creating the situation itself.

Obviously, the homeless alcoholic bears some responsibility for the failure of institutions to control him effectively. But these institutions, similarly, must bear an equal if not a greater responsibility for that failure. Study of the social conditions of this failure may suggest a set of conditions that might facilitate rehabilitation. Analysis of institutional failure may similarly suggest what gave rise to the halfway house as a social movement.

Social systems all have the dual task of defining and enforcing moral rule. Definition of, and instruction in, moral rule is called socialization. Enforcement of moral rule is called social control. Changes in complex modern society affect both socialization and social control and establish the conditions of institutional failure in rehabilitating homeless alcoholics. The words "bureaucratization," "industrialization," and "urbanization" sum up these far-reaching changes, which also make it possible, at the same time, for the halfway house movement to emerge.

1. Industrialization. First, a new social form for producing goods and services evolved. Industrialization consists of a special way of organizing the production of goods and services, making extensive use of machine tools. Agriculture, for example, today is highly industrialized, a rational business enterprise in its own right. One concomitant of industrialization is the constant upgrading of the social and technical skills of workers who will use the new tools. The other is a decrease in the need for a large supply of unskilled labor. The hobo, who followed the crops as a migratory worker, has all but disappeared, supplanted by a much older, but equally unskilled, homeless man who lives all year in the Skid Row quarter, who tries to comply with the independent cultural tradition of the hobo in a social situation in which the dependent role actually makes better sense.⁴

2. *Urbanization.* Industrialization, in turn, only speeds up urbanization. More and more people now live in urban areas (for the first time, in 1960, the U.S. Census showed more Americans living in urban than in rural areas), and the trend continues unabated. Urbanization reduces the ability of the family to perform its socializing functions. There are now several social codes from which to choose, as well as more opportunities to disobey them without being caught. And, as all studies show, the frequency of regular drinking rises with the degree of urbanization. There are more stresses and strains in urban life, and therefore more chances that some people will seek relief from their acute personal and social discomforts in extensive drinking.

3. *Bureaucratization.* Institutions of socialization and social control, such as the school on the one hand, and the prison or mental hospital on the other, become increasingly bureaucratized. A new social form for the administration of persons who staff large, complex organizations and who are sometimes inmates in them emerges. Impersonality, specific rules, hierarchy, and specialization of tasks characterize bureaucracy.³ But, other things being equal, bureaucratization in social control agencies, in turn, frequently means that organizational success often depends upon therapeutic or correctional failure.

Routine processing of the many inmates who come before agents of social control in these large, complex organizations becomes the rule. Pilgrim State Hospital in New York, for example, is a skyscraper of the sick. Here, over 15,000 mental patients live in what some call a "human warehouse." Impersonality, formal rules, hierarchy, and task specialization cause clients to become faceless, to lose individuality, to become numbers, and to accept the stereotyping with which the organization manages them. The result is that prisons and mental hospitals succeed as going concerns only to fail as corrective or rehabilitative enterprises.

These are the social conditions that spell institutional failure in the rehabilitation of homeless alcoholics. These are the selfsame features that spelled failure in the rehabilitation of non-homeless alcoholics and spawned the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous. The established ways, for instance, of defining alcoholics and of ignoring, avoiding, punishing, or even treating them for their highly stigmatized condition all contributed to the perpetuation rather than the alleviation of their acute personal problem. Faced

with the persistent failure of persons, groups, and agencies to understand and cope with their dilemma, alcoholics had no recourse but to rally around the call of a leader. They banded together, met, formulated a program, set forth their objectives, and sought to change their situation. Their program worked, and Alcoholics Anonymous became a successful movement.⁶

There are ironies in the rehabilitation of alcoholics as a social movement. For the movement to prosper and grow, particularly so far as Alcoholics Anonymous are concerned, it must always seek out new clients. The members must "carry the message," they must seek out and make converts. For, in sobering up others, they themselves maintain a more secure grasp on sobriety, particularly in the early stages of AA affiliation. Yet for AA to be started and to gain adherents and a following, it was absolutely necessary to distinguish in the minds of recruits that one need not be a Skid Row bum to be an alcoholic. Until that distinction is made—and there are probably millions of people today who are still unable to make that distinction—the "hidden" alcoholic continues to a) deny his alcoholism or b) affirm it publicly only in the privacy of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Having succeeded in making this important distinction, the movement to rehabilitate alcoholics has now begun to turn more attention to the eyesore, the stereotype, the public drunk, to the homeless alcoholic himself. The movement can now seek out as clients those who were at one time most likely to endanger its own early beginnings.

Structural Principles of the Halfway House

The halfway house was born, then, out of institutional failure to cope with homelessness, social isolation, joblessness, and alcoholism. The man between, the homeless alcoholic, in a state of perpetual transition, required a social broker of some kind, an organizational go-between, if he were to negotiate the passage from deviance to conformity. A bureaucratic establishment could not fill this bill of rehabilitation. But how, one might ask, could a halfway house succeed where more organized, more powerful, bigger enterprises had ostensibly failed? Simply by turning the principles of organization of these enterprises upside down the halfway house has established the conditions of institutional success.

The new movement has spawned residential centres of many varieties: some are public, others are private; some are rural, others are urban; some are found in houses, others, in missions or in hospitals; some charge a lot, others charge nothing at all; some have limited lengths of stay, others,

unlimited stays—and so on. The list is capable of indefinite expansion.⁷

This seemingly endless variety, however, should not suggest infinite complexity. Behind this apparent complexity and variety there is a certain simplicity, which all halfway houses share. Certain factors, common to all, constitute the structural principles of halfway houses. They are four in number; all, as should be readily apparent, are reactions to bureaucratic structures.

1. Small Size. Large organizations make their clients feel like pebbles on the beach, or like cards, easily lost in the organizational shuffle. Once the clients come to feel that no one in the institution cares about their welfare, it is only a matter of time before they come to look upon themselves in exactly the same fashion. Eventually, being apathetic about themselves and their acute personal problems becomes for them a natural state of affairs. Thus they simply come to accept the large organization's definition of them.

No halfway house worthy of the name has more than 25 clients; some have only 10 or 15. In all of them there is an unmistakable trend toward smallness. Simply by reducing the number of clients, the halfway house makes it possible for the staff to get to know the client, and for the client to learn the getting-well role the staff would like him to assume in place of the deviant sick roles.⁸

2. Simple Rules. A large book of innumerable rules, complete with precise specifications of tasks and of who can and cannot do what to, for, and with whom, betokens bureaucracy. Some predictable consequences are extreme specialization, formalized routines, and the sluggishness that people associate with the word "bureaucracy" when it is used in evaluative terms. As the world drives on and on toward complexity, halfway houses strive for simplicity and "human" scope.

One means of accomplishing this is to have a set of simple rules, understandable ones, and a small and consistent number at that. Thus, a typical halfway house will insist on strict abstinence, have a curfew, and require the payment of rent and the performance of gainful employment "on the outside" and certain housekeeping duties on the inside. It may or may not require attendance at certain kinds of group meetings, such as AA or group therapy. Beyond that, there are no further formal

rules; and frequently these rules are never formalized, but are handed down by word of mouth and honored as practices rather than as precepts.

3. *Reduction of Status Differences.* Additional consequences of the bureaucratic process, arising from extreme specialization, are a set of powerful status differences between counsellors and clients. Eventually, given other problems, counsellors spend more time defending their social position than in helping their clients to get well. Size, numerous and complex rules, formal atmosphere, and marked status differences all conspire to cut down meaningful contact between counsellors and clients. What little contact is left is often negative in sentiment and neutral in outcome, if not actually antitherapeutic. At the least, communication between counsellor and client is non-existent or at outright cross-purposes.

Many halfway houses employ as staff counsellors men who are recovered alcoholics, frequently members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Many of these men were formerly homeless alcoholics, well-versed in homelessness, social isolation, joblessness, and alcoholism. As "experts" their rank and experience are therefore not so far removed from those of the residents that meaningful communication cannot take place. In general, even when counsellors in halfway houses are non-alcoholics, every effort is bent toward reducing status symbols that impede communication.

4. *Informality.* A large helping organization sustains an impersonal, matter-of-fact, social atmosphere. Formality, for the most part, describes its characteristic style of social interaction. Essentially, all participants are strangers. All deal with one another with but a fragment of their personalities, and usually that fragment is but the public behavior that their position in the organization calls for. The words "cold" and "distant" always come to mind when people describe their experiences in any of these vast social establishments. The lack of warmth and the social distance depend rather heavily on the personal fragmentation the large, complex organization actually requires if it is to function "successfully."

Again, in reaction to bureaucratic institutions, the unmistakable trend in all halfway houses is toward an informal, homelike atmosphere. Social arrangements reminiscent of a large, extended, and happy family seem to be the goal. Some are able to produce this atmosphere quite naturally by having staff and residents both eat and drink together. In addition to taking meals together, staff and residents drink a lot of coffee together

throughout the day. Here it may be true that the customs of the bar and tavern milieu have infiltrated the halfway house "culture." Now, however, the customs in the milieu enforce the norm of sobriety rather than inebriety.

These structural principles are the basic premises of the halfway house as a social movement. Born of the institutional failures of the complex agencies of social control, they have been established so that the halfway house may yield institutional success. The shift has been from big house to small house.

The ideology of the halfway house, upon which it bases its hopes for success, can be summarized as follows: as size decreases, residents have more of a chance to get to know one another as complete individuals. As the rules shrink in size and increase in clarity, interaction may prove much easier, particularly for persons not especially noted for their interpersonal prowess. And, with easier interaction, consensus becomes more likely. As status differences between expert and client shrink, communication can proceed more easily, reach its mark, and take effect. Informality, in making for a homelike atmosphere, can induce a desire to remain a member of the group, to abide by the rules, and thus to be subject to increasingly positive influences to change behavior, the prime objective of the halfway house.⁹

The Halfway House Movement at Midpassage

The movement itself is in a state of transition at the same time that it labors on behalf of homeless alcoholics who would negotiate their return to conformity. If it is to negotiate its own trip from tentative origins to steady growth, it has to pass the two tests of a social movement, as noted earlier: it needs to get results and then to solve the organizational problems that confront all social movements. These questions of results and administration can be considered under the four rubrics that follow.

1. Organization and Society. At present, relations between any halfway house and the larger society couldn't be better. "Halfway house" is a term to conjure with; under appropriate social conditions, one can even conjure up a building, a staff, and a budget simply by mentioning this magic term. Furthermore, the prestige and drawing power of the halfway house are not limited to alcoholic rehabilitation. Though halfway houses are hard to define, new ones appear almost daily in the world of treatment and corrections. There are, conservatively, about 50 halfway houses for

returning mental patients, besides the untold and growing numbers for paroled prisoners and drug addicts.¹⁰

Coupled with this growing organizational prestige, strangely, is a lack of concern about measuring the results the halfway house is uniquely constructed to obtain. At present, though there are signs of change, the claims of success for halfway houses must be taken on faith. Much of the literature on them consists, broadly, of testimonials, endorsements, institutional advertising, or even, occasionally, outright bragging. Though there are now, by conservative estimates, at least a hundred halfway houses for alcoholics in this country, perhaps only three of them have ever given any attention to obtaining an independent assessment of their effectiveness. Here a word to the wise may suffice. Unless halfway houses give some thought to independent studies of their functioning, they are very likely to disappear from the rehabilitation scene as fast as they appeared.

Enthusiasm sustains motivation for workers in this area and for the public at large. But, if this is not quickly used to obtain systematic data on structure and functioning, types of clients, and measures of effectiveness, the public will be raising questions that those in the halfway house movement will be unprepared to answer. Without these systematic answers, the prestige of the halfway house will be found to rest solely on loud voices rather than verified knowledge.

2. Relations among Organizations. Although the public relations of the halfway house movement are, in general, quite good, its relations with other agencies of social control, both within and outside the field of alcoholic rehabilitation, could stand a vast improvement. Many halfway houses open up without first seeing if there is a need for the services they seek to render, without consulting with other agencies servicing the homeless alcoholic population; and, once open, they blithely go their own way. Having found the one true message, they cannot waste time in listening to others, since the other agencies have been tarred with the brush of institutional failure.

This form of parochialism can fast wear out a welcome that may not have been the warmest to begin with. People in the halfway house movement have a splendid new idea, based on sound principles of rehabilitation of alcoholics. Nevertheless, they are Johnny-come-latelies to rehabilitation in general, and to rehabilitation of alcoholics in particular. Social welfare

is rapidly becoming one of this country's largest industries. If halfway houses cannot learn the techniques of community organization and how to get along and co-operate with the entire network of social agencies, they will very quickly become the junk heap of alcoholic rehabilitation, performing for that network of agencies the same role as Skid Row performs for the average large American city.

3. *Internal Relations.* All reactions, of course, invite, and usually get, their own reactions in turn. In quite properly reacting against the faults of bureaucracy, halfway houses came into being as a defense against institutionalization. There are signs, however, that an excess of informality can have negative effects in two important areas, therapeutic policy and orderly administration.

(a) THERAPEUTIC POLICY. In the halfway house, the house director is a key figure, perhaps the dominant one, the one setting the over-all stamp on the manner in which therapeutic policy is shaped and executed.⁸ This concentration of power leaves room for personal feelings to play a large part, and makes it difficult to know if a simple rule in a supposedly simple organization is really a rule or not. Charismatic leaders of halfway houses may be the most effective leaders, but it is still hard to routinize charisma. Stability is an essential in any therapeutic policy, and homeless alcoholics, perhaps more than other social deviants, need more, rather than less, routine.

(b) ORDERLY ADMINISTRATION. The staff in some halfway houses, other things being equal, would much prefer to be alcoholism counsellors rather than administrators or overseers. Frequently, because of shortages, however, the staff often finds itself performing both roles. It is very hard to develop counselling rapport with a man whom you must also command, and sometimes even punish. Yet, in the solution of this role conflict (usually in favor of being a good counsellor), orderly administration suffers.¹¹

In addition, there are signs that house operations and fiscal management lack system. Naturally, everyone on the staff is most anxious to get on with the business of rehabilitating homeless alcoholics. Detail work is bothersome; in some state-operated halfway houses, it is seen as "red tape" or the "busy" work designed by administrators who don't truly understand the first things that come first in rehabilitating the homeless alcoholic. However, unless more attention is given to running the allegedly

simple organization in accordance with sound methods of administration, the entire halfway house movement is in jeopardy.

4. *Counsellor-client Relations*. Counsellors on halfway house staffs, particularly when they are recovered alcoholics, often victimize themselves, perhaps more often their clients, by their beliefs. Abstinence sometimes makes a staff heart grow harsher as contact with difficult clients increases. A natural defense is the use of typifications, or unkind categorical generalizations, about the resident alcoholics.

For instance, the alcoholic is widely known for his dependency. Halfway house ideology requires the staff to get clients to transfer dependency on alcohol to the halfway house, its staff, its rules, its residents, in some therapeutic combination thereof. Unless some care is exercised, staff members can find that they have actually created a dependency that they are not very anxious to break, for there is power in such relationships. Without the natural checks and balances that can operate against such relations in a somewhat larger organization, the staff may become manipulative without being therapeutic. When that comes about, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the manipulator from the manipulated. Therefore, unless counsellors on halfway house staffs become aware of the kinds of feelings that underlie these relationships, they are apt to extend the very dependency they seek to check.

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